

HALL COUNTY- SUDANESE REFUGEE FINDS NEBRASKA LAND OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

David Choul remembers little of his father.

It was the exodus to the refugee camp he'll never forget.

Yet, it was that very misery that his mother used as a catalyst to secure her children's future.

"Everything I know was from my mother," David says of his father. "They thought my father was having a relationship with rebels in southern Sudan. People killed each other day and night. Since my country had been in war for at least 20 to 30 years, there had never been any peaceful living."

David was born just before the Second Revolution which plunged Sudan's new civilian government into civil war. He was only three when his father was killed by guerilla forces, leaving his mother to care for him and four siblings in his native Nasir, Sudan.

Then the rebels began searching for his mother in an effort to destroy the entire family. David's mother and uncle did everything possible to save their lives. "It wasn't easy to get out of that tremendous problem," David tells his story. "My mother decided to move out of the country. She found a way. We snuck out of the city of Nasir. There were a lot of problems along the way. Our clothes and food were robbed -- but for the willing of God we made it to Ethiopia."

Their journey took them to a refugee camp, the trip taking two long excruciating months. David was only five at the time, and there were many days when the family barely had food to eat: "But the point was, if we made it alive everything would be fine. It was a long hope for (a) long way," David adds. "Many of the people who moved out of the city lost their lives because of starvation, sickness or being killed by enemies."

Ethiopia is a landlocked country in the northeast African region known as the Horn of Africa. War and hunger have always plagued this nation. It was where David spent his childhood, and despite the turmoil, he is grateful to the country for saving his life and offering his family a place to live, going so far as to call Ethiopia his "second family."

David had a hunger for education, but it was next to impossible to continue his education in Sudan: "Maybe you would go three months to school and then the school would be closed. In some cases it did not last long because of enemies who did not want us to have an education. Or maybe there are no teachers or no books, or suffering such as lack of food or clothes or transportation. Most of all it's all about war in the country between Muslim and Christian."

Now that David was located in a refugee camp operated by the United Nations in Ethiopia, his family was able to get food, clothing, and perhaps the education he so badly wanted: "We depended on (the) UN. Sometimes we tried to have a little garden and grow maize and vegetables. It wasn't that much but we tried to do everything we could. In Ethiopia, (getting an) education is not so bad compared to Sudan. It was just an average education in Africa. But refugee cases were different because refugees did not have specific places for living."

Those differences often meant lack of teachers and school materials, moving refugees from camp to camp, fighting between refugees themselves and problems between native citizens and refugee students. It was what David called "an improper life."

"Even though people tried to resist, it was the toughest life to live. I had been trying so hard to get what I could get from school but it never worked out. But I always bear in mind that something would come along. No matter how hard it was, I stayed optimistic. As a human, God knows when he's going to give a wishful people a chance to get out of a problem."

Getting out of the problem was just what David's mother was determined to do. She had been planting seeds of hope for over a decade to come to America to reposition her family into a better life. Then, in the late 1990s, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees opened up an opportunity for refugees to go to the United States or Canada.

In July of 1999, the Choul family was interviewed and given medical checkups. Two years later they received their bookings from immigration to come to America when the September 11 attack in New York occurred, causing their flight to be cancelled.

But even that wouldn't stop David's mother.

"My mother was persistent," he says of her tenacity. "She couldn't give up. She knew that most of those that come to the U.S. are independent people, they work and support their families. So she knew if we came here, or if anyone of us came here, we should be okay because we could get an apartment and work."

In 2002, the entire family was able to leave the refugee camp and fly to Jacksonville, Florida. With no place to live, no job or food, Lutheran Services stepped in to help when they arrived. The first six months were especially difficult. David had learned some English in the refugee camp, but the rest of his family spoke only their native Nuer.

After 11 months of living in Florida, David's mother and siblings moved to Omaha because his uncle was living there. David opted to move to Kentucky where a cousin was living.

But his heart soon turned toward the responsibilities he felt towards his mother. He knew she needed help with transportation and the everyday demands of life.

"I think back about everything she did for me when I was growing up," he says. "I didn't want to let her down like that, letting her live somewhere separated away from us. I never try to separate from my family."

David attempted to settle in Omaha, but he found the surroundings unsettling: "I tried to live in Omaha but I would see a lot of kids who could do something for their lives -- just walking the streets doing nothing, not wanting to do anything good to be alive. I thought maybe my brothers and sisters would try to do the same thing, so I came to Grand Island. I drove here and thought this city should be safe for kids."

After moving his family to Grand Island, David found work and was finally able to concentrate on an education, a dream that had long been on hold. "I tried to go to school in Florida and I couldn't do it. I had two jobs and my car broke down. But I knew that if I really want it, I could make time to go to school."

Through the encouragement of his uncle, David signed up for adult basic education classes for the 2004 semester at Central Community College at the Grand Island campus. Because of the minimum education in Ethiopia, testing determined his reading and writing skills were second to third grade level. He also took English as a second language. Working full-time and going to school part-time, along with a wife and growing family often meant little sleep or time to study.

But persistence paid off.

David earned his GED in three years, a feat Ann Chambers, Adult Basic Education Coordinator at the college, calls "incredible" considering the language barrier and elementary level he began at. "He had to keep at it," she commented. "He had to keep trying and he never gave up and that's always easy."

Even David, now 25, is surprised by it all.

"What really surprised me was I put it in my brain that I have to learn, but I just didn't know when I will get it or if I will pass the (GED) test. When they told me I passed, I was really happy, and I thank God for

letting me do it. Otherwise, I can't do it -- he helped me. It's really hard to wake up at 7 (a.m.) because sometimes I get off work at 3 (a.m.)," David says of his job at Swift & Company. "Then I have to get up and make sure (my son) is ready for school. Then I come home and take a nap and go to school." David's wife also works so he has to get their four children off to school and daycare.

David also credits his children and siblings for working so hard towards an education: "I wanted to graduate so I could be an example for my children and brothers and sisters. I want to make sure my children have an education. I do everything for my kids; I want them to be better people."

In addition, he is quick to recognize the teachers at Central Community College for his diploma: "These people opened my eyes and my ears. They showed me a lot of things and taught me more things that I would never have known. I'm very proud of their generosity."

That generosity continues to extend itself. Penny Holloway, Adult Basic Education Program Coordinator at CCC, is currently helping David apply for scholarships to attend college to achieve a new dream -- earning a business and administration degree and owning his own business someday. He knows it will be difficult financially, as David also sends money to a cousin attending college in Africa and has to finish paying back the UN agency who helped his family get to America.

Yet that doesn't deter him.

"In the land of opportunity, education is the thing that's definitely free. U.S.A. is a great home of education. America is the only place where the poor people can earn their education if they want to. It was always my choice to go to school and I never paid a dime. If I want to go to college, there are ways to pay it with financial aid or a grant which always offers anybody an opportunity to go to school."

David is well aware that owning a business in Africa is much easier than in America, but the love he has for his family is a strong support system, especially his mother and uncle who saved his life. "I know they helped me so I have to work hard to help them. Whatever I do couldn't be good enough for them," he says with a wide grin and a humility that seems to come easily.

Besides that, this 'land of opportunity' offers David the chance to develop his own personality and purpose: "I think that everything somebody does in this world is up to you, what you decide," he reflects. "I know sometimes there are things you aren't able to do, but for most things ... it's up to you to make your dreams come true."